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VIEWS

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Clark's Decision

Less than two months before deciding it was time to go home to California, William P. Clark knew about and was not opposing a conservative campaign boosting him for White House chief of staff—a campaign quickly deflated by a few words from President Reagan.

The president certainly said nothing derogatory about his longtime friend and faithful servant. But he made clear he felt Clark was doing just fine as secretary of interior. That cooled hopes for a conservative renaissance in Reagan's second term to be built around Clark. Presidential counselor Edwin Meese III will not be replaced when he goes to the Justice Department. No new place has been found for departing U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Faith Whittlesey will soon quit as presidential assistant for public liaison. Secretary of State George Shultz is purging many hard-liners throughout the diplomatic service.

The melancholy thus induced among conservative activists seems scarcely perceived by Ronald Reagan. He considers himself more than adequate to safeguard conservative interests. The president knows he remains immensely popular among rank-and-file Republicans and conservatives who find no fault with his administration. That attitude is the root cause of Clark's departure.

To some insiders, Clark's year at Interior was merely a cushion for the shock in October 1983 when he tired of tong wars inside the administration and quit as national security director. That left the chief of staff, James A. Baker III, unopposed at the White

House. Clark's arch-enemy was not Baker but Michael K. Deaver, deputy chief of staff. When word circulated shortly after the election that Deaver would be leaving for a lucrative private-sector job (which in fact was confirmed yesterday), the conservative movement began pressing Clark to become chief of staff if and when Baker found a vacant Cabinet slot.

Prominent conservatives inside (Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey) and outside the administration were enlisted. But when we reported that Clark was favored to be Baker's eventual successor, one political operative closely connected to the White House told us flatly: "You have as much chance as Bill Clark to be chief of staff." The first lady, we explained, never would accept him.

Clark once was a favorite of Nancy Reagan, but disaffection set in years ago. It might have been her failure to persuade him to resign from the California Supreme Court and join the Reagan campaign full-time when it was foundering early in 1980. Clark more recently has been viewed by the first lady as an "ideologue" in contrast to "pragmatists" Baker and Deaver, who help her husband get things done.

In late November, the air went out of the balloon floated by Clark's supporters. The president told them he already had a fine chief of staff in Jim Baker and that the judge was in the right place at the Interior Department. Thereafter, friends say, Clark seemed "discouraged" by incessant internal wars inside the administration and eager to return to his California ranch.

The president clearly does not believe his second term needs a face lift or that his national security policies are drifting from the purposes for which he first sought the presidency. Whether or not this presidential confidence proves well-founded will determine the importance of Judge Clark's departure.

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